

Review: Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer (eds.): Intergenerational Justice

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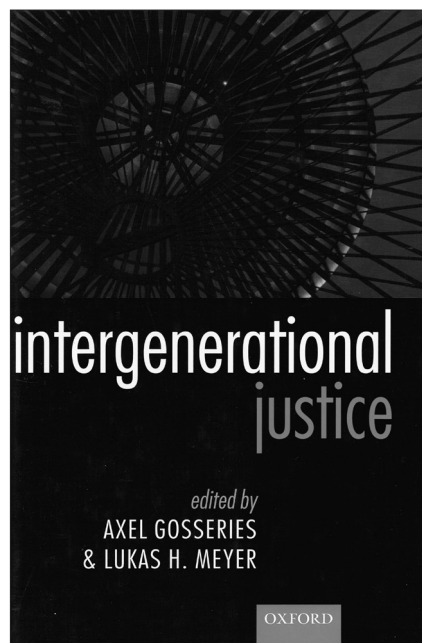
Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer (eds.): Intergenerational Justice

Reviewed by Laure Gillot-Assayag

The future of subsequent generations is the subject of growing social concern as well as becoming a pressing question for economists and philosophers in the context of large-scale political, social and environmental upheaval (economic crises, pension schemes, environmental disasters...).

The purpose of *Intergenerational Justice* is to address this issue by providing a framework for philosophical reflection through sixteen articles by internationally recognised philosophers. It questions the content and the relevance of a theory for future generations. Do present generations have responsibilities or even obligations towards future individuals? Is it possible for generations to cooperate, even though they will never meet?

The book is intended primarily for readers well versed in the subject, witness its sometimes technical language and demonstrations. Clearly structured, it is divided into a theoretical part (“theory”) and an analysis of specific cases (“specific cases”). However, the present review will not follow this configuration, for both epistemological



(theory never goes without practice, synthesis without analysis) and organizational considerations (the articles’ content do not legitimise such a distinction). A thematic analysis will be privileged in order to synthesise the various contributions.

Intergenerational Justice exposes the theories

commonly used to analyse the problem of future generations: Communitarianism (J. Thompson), Libertarianism (H. Steiner, P. Vallentyne), Contractualism (S.M. Gardiner, D. Heyd, D. Attas, R. Kumar), Marxism (C. Bertram), Reciprocity (A. Gosseries), Sufficientarianism (L.H. Meyer, D. Roser, C. Wolf), Egalitarianism (G. Arrhenius) and Constitutionalism (V. M. Muniz-Fraticelli).

Obligations regarding future generations create a clear partition between the different theories. Do present generations have a duty towards non-contemporaries? For Thompson, the notion of obligation is both necessary and desirable: the “lifetime-transcending interests” concept (the existence of interests that remain after the death of the individual) allows the existence of a chain of intergenerational bonds. Our future demands will depend on future individuals. This expectation towards future generations justifies a duty of respect for all non-existent individuals – be it of the dead or of future individuals – and the development of a “trans-generational policy”. Unfortunately, the

practical implementation of this policy is not spelled out by Thompson. The author defines herself as partisan of a “weak communitarianism”, a patchwork of liberal and communitarian ideas promoting the rights of individuals and the existence of a common good. According to Thompson, the liberal approach is not relevant because it focuses on the interests of contemporaries, and leaves out the question of intergenerational bonds, relegating it as a marginal issue. On the other hand, “strong communitarianism” (the self as a communal structure) is contradicted by the empirical reality of growing multiculturalism, which makes it difficult to think of a common and interchangeable citizen identity. The degrees of obligations for libertarianism, defined as invoking a strong respect for private property, vary depending on whether it is a right-wing libertarianism (agents can acquire full property of things not owned, like nature) or a left-wing libertarianism (natural resources collectively belong to everyone, so private ownership requires collective permission). Steiner and Vallentyne advocate a left-libertarianism: they consider that the value of the resources left, technology for instance, compensates for the excessive degradation of resources. For these authors, the “decent share proviso” (not giving more than a decent opportunity to use natural resources) is not sufficient, and thus one should apply an “egalitarian proviso” (the individual appropriates resources if and only if what is left provides equal opportunities for use). For L. H. Meyer and D. Roser, proponents of a sufficientiarist approach, a strict egalitarianism is both wrong (it demands degrading the state of the better-off for the sake of equality, even if this does not improve the state of the worse-off) and utopian, since it implies the suppression of all intergenerational differences. The authors advocate the obligation of a sufficient property legacy, but also point out that sufficientiarist theories often recommend giving below the necessary resources threshold. At the same time, Arrhenius demonstrates that claims of egalitarianism are not logically viable given population fluctuations.

The question of intergenerational responsibility raises the possibility to harm future generations. Bertram is little convinced by the relevance of the Marxist concept of exploitation applied to a future setting. If exploitation involves someone (an

exploiter) who secures an advantage by exploiting someone else (the exploited), it is impossible to make an informed judgment on future benefits or losses. However, the non-applicability of this concept does not exempt us from paying attention to potentially dangerous acts. This discussion highlights a “time bombs” problem: “time bombs” involve actions the negative effects of which are visible only on a deferred basis, therefore suffered by future generations. To meet the challenge of climate responsibility, one should, according to C. Wolf, apply a sufficientiarist approach using a two steps climate policy: the first one geared to austerity with specific targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and a second one labelled as “sustainable”, which seeks to maintain emissions at an acceptable rate.

Kumar strives to redefine the harm imposed on future generations with “Scanlonian contractualism”: even if there is no physical relationship with future humans, there is a legal relationship based on what is justifiable or not for someone. To illustrate this point, he states that the request advanced by African-Americans for symbolic as well as materialistic compensation for slavery is legitimate, even if the harm has been done to them only indirectly.

Therefore, these theories towards future generations lead us to think not only in epistemic, but also in motivational terms. What motivates this current generation to take care of the remote future? Birnbacher stresses motivation obstacles: the abstract character of recipients, referred to as invisible and faceless, would prevent the development of a “chain of love”, to quote Passmore. Other constraints are the uncertainty of success with actions undertaken (will these actions really make a difference for future generations?) as well as their cumulative nature (will these actions be followed by the next generations?). Bykvist also notes that future generations’ preferences are unpredictable.

For Birnbacher, only indirect motivations (over a maximum of two generations) can help solve the motivational problem. The author gives the example of parents who are naturally concerned for the future well-being of their children and also have an interest in ensuring their children’s support in case they depend on them at a certain age.

Is it possible to establish a contract with future generations? Gardiner acknowledges

that Rawls was one of the first to address the issue of future generations through an original contract. However, like Heyd, he doubts that Rawls’s contractarian approach can be extended to an intergenerational framework. Gardiner shows that the intergenerational jump involves a reevaluation of the design, structure, and rationale for cooperation: according to him, Rawls dismisses the initial generation’s problem, which remains a net contributor. Moreover, Rawls does not explain how generations internalise future generations’ concern. Heyd adds that, even without having the principles of justice based on a contractarian approach, there is always a value in justice that remains. Attas’s theory, on the contrary, seeks to exploit Rawlsian contractualism by adding amendments so as to extend it to all generations. He argues, however, that it is difficult to defend Rawls’s “two-stage approach”, i.e. the period of accumulation of wealth and the period needed to secure fair institutions, since the latter necessarily implies a zero increase in population.

For Gosseries, cooperation between generations lies in reciprocity theories. In some detail, he analyses the three models of reciprocity theories (ascending, descending, reciprocal). For him, the reciprocity requirement is justified not from a perspective of giving in return, but on the basis that it should not be seen as a self-indulgent generation, or a “free rider”, when compared to previous generations.

Muniz-Fraticelli, meanwhile, strongly defends the need for a perpetual constitution, differentiating himself from two approaches: that of Thomas Jefferson, for whom a constitution should expire after a certain time – and, according to James Madison, run the risk of degenerating into anarchy – and that of M. Otsuka, for whom the perpetual foundation of the constitution lies in the tacit consent of the youth expressed by their choice to remain voluntarily within the society. However, “tacit consent” is a vague assumption that does not allow the establishment of a hypothetical consent. Muniz-Fraticelli offers an alternative scheme: a perpetual constitution is necessary to ensure universal and eternal individual rights, but it is also legitimate to give citizens the right of amendment and interpretation so that they can choose the time to “reconstitute”, with respect to constitutionalism.

Some of this work’s limitations concern its style, which is sometimes unnecessarily

technical. The structure itself, consisting in a collection of articles, involves a juxtaposition of opinions which makes it difficult for the reader to develop an overview of the challenges for future generations. Furthermore, this leads to a certain repetition of themes – Rawls's contract theory is presented in four different articles. Some omissions are also regrettable, such as the

absence of utilitarianism, or the analysis of intergenerational justice toward non-human individuals. These criticisms are, however, minimal, given the scale of the issues covered by the authors. Without a doubt, *Intergenerational Justice* opens new avenues for reflection and action, particularly on the reductions of greenhouse gas emissions and on the possibility of a

perpetual constitution. The book reflects the urgent need to consider and propose solutions that can respond, even partially, to such a complex problem.

Gosseries, Axel / Meyer, Lukas H. (eds.) (2009): *Intergenerational Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press. 432 pages. ISBN: 978-0-199-28295-1. Price: £70.